

Shifts in Pet Owner Demographics

Article by Roxanne Hawn



Where to find the data, and what to watch.

Shifting demographic trends among pet owners bring new attitudes toward pet care with them. If you approach today's veterinary clients the same as you did 10 or even five years ago, don't be surprised to see drops in the level of consent, cooperation and loyalty you receive.

Even things you consider standard practice may be up for grabs. Unlike earlier generations of clients, younger pet owners are less likely to:

- Give consent for veterinary teams to take pets out of the exam room for routine tasks like blood draws
- Agree to feed a recommended diet long term because of lower brand loyalty and higher willingness to give new products a try
- Keep scheduled appointments

Missed appointments? Alisa Agozzino, PhD, APR, associate professor of public relations at Ohio Northern University, says, "From what I have observed in the classroom and working with Millennials, as a whole, they tend to not hold appointments or commitments with authority. There is no remorse for having to cancel/reschedule last minute and

potentially putting others out because of their lack of follow through."

So, if you start seeing a higher number of missed or cancelled appointments, that may be why.

Client education only gets you so far in aligning pet owner expectations and behaviors with practice norms. At some point, veterinary professionals will need to address the ways these shifts affect daily practice.

Adjusting to new demands

Take the university where Agozzino works as an example. In addition to service dogs, the university now allows emotional support animals that meet the school's emotional support animal policy.

I spend quite a bit of time on university campuses for higher-ed work I do, and I can tell you that colleges and universities are not exactly nimble organizations when it comes to changes in norms and protocols. And, yet, the demand from students for emotional support animal access—to campus housing, to classrooms and such—drives changes in these pet policies.

"From an educator's point of view," Agozzino says, "I've witnessed more animals in the classroom this year than ever before."

What's coming next

If you don't already have a plan to find, monitor and respond to changing pet owner demographics, now is the time to get busy. What's that saying? An ounce of proactive effort prevents a pounding headache from frustration?

While a higher percentage of people ages 45–54 own pets (57.4%), Millennials—ages 18–34—make up the largest number of pet owners¹ simply because they are the largest living generation.²

They also tend to be more diverse racially, with the largest number identifying as multiracial.³ We see this, in part, from a 6 percent jump in dog and cat ownership in minority households from 2012–2016, representing an addition of 800,000 minority households as pet owners.⁴

All pet lovers love pets, but according to a GALE study, 44 percent of Millennials see their pets as starter children.⁵ As Adweek recently put it, “the fur baby economy is real.”

Millennials bring spending power because they typically adopt traditional markers of adulthood later than earlier generations, including marriage and home ownership.⁶ About one-third of them live with a parent.⁷

What does this mean for you?

Unlike clinical data where it's often easier to see what works and what doesn't, following demographic shifts and societal trends requires some reading between the lines and testing predictions against what you see daily in your own community and practice.

Watch for changes like these:

More single women and men as veterinary clients.

After decades with most veterinary decision-makers being female (moms and non-moms alike), veterinary clinics will likely see many more solo men as clients.

More smaller dogs. High levels of renting versus home ownership and younger pet owners wanting to take their pets with them everywhere means a higher number of dogs under 25 pounds.

- Dogs under 25 pounds (52 percent)
- Dogs between 25-40 pounds (41 percent)
- Dogs over 40 pounds (31 percent)⁸

Maybe more discretionary income spending because younger clients often don't have car payments, mortgages or rent to pay. Millennials are often willing to spend more for premium, customized and cutting-edge products and services aimed at improving pet health.⁹ However, they have not yet hit the highest income stage of their careers, so their true spending power is still to come.

At the same time, independent households that are headed-up by Millennials also experience more poverty (5.3 million households in poverty versus 4.2 million households headed by Gen X),¹⁰ so not everyone has the luxury of being spend-crazy for pets.

Higher expectations even for routine care. Look for opportunities to tout doing more in your daily efforts, including things like fear-free and cat-friendly efforts.¹¹ Pay extra attention to new solutions for concerns such as motion sickness and pet anxiety so that Millennial pet

Where to Find Data and Watch Trends

Here are a few key places to find reputable data and information on changing consumer demographics and attitudes:

- Pew Research Center
- Pew Social Trends
- Packaged Facts U.S. Pet Market Outlook
- VetMEDResearch
- AVMA Economic Reports and Veterinary Market Reports
- American Pet Products Association
- Major pet trade shows such as SuperZoo and Global Pet Expo

You might be able to find good local data from economic development councils in major cities, but often those groups focus on big business opportunities, like trying to get a major company to put its headquarters in that city.

Your local chamber of commerce may also have relevant data sets culled from the census, but you'll likely need to assess the relevance and applicability yourself.

owners can, indeed, take their pets everywhere with less worry.

Lowest level of geographic mobility in 50 years.¹²

Despite not having typical barriers to moving, Millennials stay put in a community more than earlier generations. This poses a long-term opportunity for veterinary practices if you can overcome a lower level of brand loyalty.

Technology and social media

You knew we'd get here eventually. Right? If you believe the hype, then younger pet owners live always connected to their smartphones and other devices.

That's, in part, why we've talked about drops in phone calls and voicemails and big jumps in text messaging, as well as veterinary practice apps and other technology, to stay connected to clients in past issues of *The Messenger*.

You can't just assume, though, that Facebook is dead to younger pet owners because that's where their moms and grandmas are. SnapChat isn't necessarily all the rage, and many Twitter accounts go almost entirely unused. These statements may or may not be true for your clients. Survey them about their social media usage before you jump into the fray.

For example, Millennial parents use Pinterest and Twitter more, and Millennial women lean toward Instagram.¹³

And, we're talking about connecting with friends, family and others with shared interests on social media. When it comes to businesses and brands reaching out through social channels, Millennials find it a bit puzzling.

"While they use social media for personal use, they don't fully understand how or why a business would use it," Agozzino says. "They want information on social channels to be relatable. The more a Millennial feels a brand is trying to build a relationship with them personally through a social channel, the more likely they'll engage with that brand."

Use of mobile tech isn't simply scrolling through cute dog and cat photos in your downtime. It's much more immediate too.

Agozzino says, "I would argue Millennials find much of their information via the smartphone on-the-go. From traveling and working with Millennials extensively, many will search an address, look for a coupon, or read reviews while

in the process of making a decision within minutes."

Is your practice set-up for instant information and access? If not, think about how you can improve your immediacy for younger clients.

Watch, evaluate, and then respond

Watch for trends in demographic and social shifts and see if they ring true in your community or not before you go making big changes to how you do things. Do you need an action plan for missed or late-breaking cancellations to keep your schedule full? Do you need to restructure your processes so that you keep pets in the exam room with their people as much as possible? Should you recommend and sell wearable and other pet-tech products?

Before changes in pet consumer behaviors and expectations cause negative effects on your practice, look for ways to meet clients where they are.

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